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FOR WHITE WOMEN: *YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE*, BUT WE ALL HIDE OUR FACES AND CRY— LITERARY ILLUMINATION FOR WHITE AND BLACK SISTER/FRIENDS

Based on Bebe Moore Campbell's novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*

ANGELA MAE KUPENDA*

Abstract: This essay is an experiment, seeking to facilitate honest and less defensive discussion about race and gender. Generally, discussions of race, gender and the law are difficult, but perhaps, the discourse can be facilitated through the lens of literature. My theory is that women are unable to claim a position of power because of divisive racial conflicts. I approach these conflicts by examining the conflict between two literary characters (a black woman and a white woman) in Bebe Moore Campbell's novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. Directly examining the characters illuminates the racial divide between black and white women existing in our real lives and systems. This experiment is essential because as long as women, potential sister/friends, remain alienated from one another—which is also an alienation from self—they will never fully actualize their power and reorder oppressive societal and legal orders.

INTRODUCTION

Often, women sing the blues.¹ Sometimes we get so involved in each trying to sing our woeful tune with more volume and passion

* Copyright © 2001 by Angela Mae Kupenda. Visiting Professor, Notre Dame Law School, on professional leave of absence from Mississippi College School of Law. I am especially grateful to Professor Ruth-Arlene W. Howe, Boston College Law School, for her continuous support, advice, and encouragement. We all need a big sisterly, guardian angel; Ruth-Arlene is that for me. I also appreciate the many faculty members and community members, especially the wonderful white women, who discussed the ideas presented in this paper with me, including those of Franklin Pierce Law Center in Concord, New Hampshire, Pine Manor Women's College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts (where I served as Scholar-in-Residence), Florida International University in Miami, Florida, Stephen F. Austin University in Nagadoches, Texas, and my home school, Mississippi College School of Law. I also benefited much from the research assistance of two of my former Mississippi College students, attorneys Keyla McCullum and Wendy Wilson, and the superb editorial assistance of this journal. I dedicate this paper to all women. May we all join as proponents of true justice for all and as opponents to all forms of oppression.

¹ "Everybody wants to know why I sing the blues." B.B. KING, *Why I Sing the Blues*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records 1998). The blues cannot be adequately defined

than the other, that we forget about the commonality of our blues and the commonality of the source of our blues.² Rather than fuss and disagree about whose blues is the worst, we should realize that although our blues ain't exactly the same, we are all hiding our faces and crying.

by reading a dictionary definition of the music or of the feeling. Having the blues is a feeling that you are doing all you can, but it does not seem to be enough to satisfy folks. One of the characters from *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* gives some insight into the feelings when he says, "Everybody gets sad. But the blues is deeper than sadness The blues is something in your soul telling you they ain't no hope, shit ain't never gon' be right. You know what I mean?" BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL, *YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE* 410 (1995).

The blues music and the feeling are almost inseparable. This is evident as another character of the novel tries to explain to his son about his sharecropping, picking cotton in the fields for white folks days, "We picked that cotton until our fingers bled. And sometimes when it would get bad- and boy it could get bad- we'd be in them fields just a-singing, you know. 'Cause them songs, them songs could get you right." *Id.* at 433.

I can't explain the blues to you any better. Listen to some blues music and maybe you can hear or feel it for yourself. I think that everybody sings the blues, sometimes. And sometimes, like the great Mississippi born, blues artist B.B. King, I feel like singing, "every day I have the blues." See B.B. KING, *Every Day I Have the Blues*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records 1998), cf. Cheryl I. Harris, *Bell's Blues*, 60 U. CHI. L. REV. 783 (1993) (reviewing DERRICK BELL, *FACES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM* (1992)).

Women as a group have a number of concerns inciting our woeful tunes. For example, white and black women are denied the inclusion of our stories in traditional histories. See BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA xvii (Gerda Lerner, ed., 1992). Women face gender violence nationally. See generally *United States v. Morrison*, 528 U.S. 598 (2000) (holding a congressional attempt to address violence against women on national level was unconstitutional). Depression plagues women, especially black women, in their quest for happiness. See, e.g., AUDREY CHAPMAN, *SEVEN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENTS FOR FINDING A LOVING MAN* 12-13 (2001). Protection from rape is a continuing concern evolving from the historical lack of legal protection afforded white women from marital rape and black women from resistance of any rape. See KATHARINE T. BARTLETT & ANGELA P. HARRIS, *GENDER AND LAW* 8 (1998).

² The commonalities are even more compelling as the status of white women in America more closely approximates that of black women:

Since more White women work and are career-bound today, their sensibility has become more akin to that of Black women. Marriage-and-family expert Robert Blood wrote of working women in general: "The employment of women affects the power structure of the family by equalizing the resources of husband and wife. A working wife's husband listens to her more, and she listens to herself more Thus her power increases and, relatively speaking, the husband's falls." The working mother also makes a significant impression on the next generation. Blood commented: "Daughters of working mothers are more independent, more self-reliant, more aggressive, more dominant, and more disobedient. Such girls are no longer meek, mild, submissive, and feminine like little ladies ought to be."

PAULA GIDDINGS, *WHEN AND WHERE I ENTER: THE IMPACT OF BLACK WOMEN ON RACE AND SEX IN AMERICA* 353 (1988) (footnotes omitted).

As a starting point for this essay, my first impulse was to share excerpts from my story, honestly, forthrightly, and completely. I've spent a lot of time singing the blues about the conditions that I face as a black woman and about the severed sisterhood I experience with many of my white sister/friends. I do have stories to tell, but I've let my first impulse pass. This is not the time for me to tell my fact-specific story. I fear that if I told it right now, I would not tell it as honestly as I should. Honesty is critical in alleviating the blues and in helping to dry my tears and those of others.

So, I'm going to use another lens to indirectly, and less confrontationally, tell the same story. That lens is literature.³ Literature can be even more "honest" than life,⁴ as this essay will illustrate. Race and gender are very sensitive topics. Sometimes our own defensiveness prevents any discussion from being fruitful or productive in improving the relationships between blacks and whites generally, and black women and white women specifically. My theory is that literature can be used to bridge this divide. Perhaps by directly discussing the fictional, but realistic, predicaments of literary characters, we can have an indirect, but honest and less defensive, conversation about our own real-life situations. In these times, it's going to be ever more important for people to acknowledge not only their own individual biases and prejudices, but also the way in which societal forces, mores, and norms constrict and limit individuals from reaching out and connecting with others in ways that could be freeing for us all.

This essay is an important experiment. This is an experiment in using literature to facilitate mending a critical but presently shattered connection where real-life, fact-based discussions have failed. Using Bebe Moore Campbell's novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*,⁵ I will explore the conflicts and severed sisterhoods of black and white

³ Admittedly, even telling a fictional story can generate confrontation and defensiveness. Consider the following statement by bell hooks in discussing defensive reactions to Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*: "If this is the way folks respond to fiction, we can imagine then how much harder it is for black women to actually speak honestly in daily life about their real traumatic experiences." BELL HOOKS, *SISTERS OF THE YAM* 25 (1993).

⁴ See Angela Mae Kupenda, *Law, Life and Literature: A Critical Reflection of Life and Literature to Illuminate How Laws of Domestic Violence, Race, and Class Bind Black Women*, 42 *HOW. L.J.* 1, 2-3 (1998) [hereinafter Kupenda, *Law, Life and Literature: Domestic Violence*] (using Alice Walker's book *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* to challenge how laws of divorce and domestic violence impact black women); Angela Mae Kupenda et al., *Law, Life and Literature: Using Literature and Life to Expose Transracial Adoption Laws as Adoption on a One-Way Street*, 17 *BUFF. PUB. INT. L.J.* 43 (1998-1999) [hereinafter Kupenda, *Law, Life and Literature: Transracial Adoption*].

⁵ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1.

women,⁶ and use the examination of the literary characters' conflicts to facilitate illumination of our real-life divides.

In *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, one horrible incident, stemming from supremacist and patriarchal societal forces, results in intense, potentially life altering, pain or "blues" in the lives of several different women, black and white. In this essay, I will analogize the pains of these women to the pains of black and white women, collectively and individually. Although the blues of the female characters from the book ain't always exactly the same, their blues stem from the same horrible source and cause all the women involved great pain. Only after the women take substantial steps to uncover their faces and emotionally uncover the source of their pain, do their blues lessen in intensity and the door begins to slowly open for their connections to one another to become partially restored. The same applies for black and white women today, as you will see in this essay.

In Part I, I join other scholars in advocating an expanded notion of law and literature and a special role for literature in the truth telling essential for resolving the ongoing racial divide. This will be followed in Part II with the core story of the literary characters. There, I will tell a portion of the story of the characters who are relevant in this essay. That section is composed almost completely of narrative detail; in order for the reader to better understand the relevance of the story, the reader must first hear part of the story in an uninterrupted fashion. I want the reader to become immersed in the fictional, but realistic, life situations of the characters.

Then in Part III, I will supplement the core story with other details. I will continue to tell the story of the characters, but with interspersed analysis and narrative to offer more direct illumination of the relationship of the characters' predicaments to those of black and white women generally. In doing so, I will explore the intersectionality conflicts in white women's experiences. The intersectionality of race and gender is often utilized to explore the conditions of black women and other women of color in America.⁷ Black women experience

⁶ Although I focus on the severed relationship of white and black women, I hope that all women, and men too, can find something helpful here. The race issue is broader than black and white. The gender split cuts more than black and white women. We all must start somewhere, however. So I start in one of the places where I hurt, as I speak to those white potential sister/friends who I believe have only faintly heard my voice as a black woman.

⁷ A number of scholars have written extensively in this area. See generally, e.g., Rosalio Castro & Lucia Corral, *Women of Color and Employment Discrimination: Race and Gender Combined in Title VII Claims*, 6 LA RAZA L.J. 159, 161 (1993) (referring to other scholars in this area, including Kimberle Crenshaw, Adrienne Dale-Davis, Mari Matsuda, Angela Harris,

negative societal reactions both as Black Americans and as women. Black women and other women of color are multi-dimensional,⁸ however, and are not so easily described by this intersecting identity. We have some race issues in common with men of color, some gender issues in common with white females, and some separate issues and identities.⁹ Although intersectionality and multi-dimensionality theo-

and Peggy Smith); Trina Grillo, *Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master's House*, 10 BERKELEY WOMEN'S L.J. 16 (1995); Trina Grillo & Stephanie M. Wildman, *Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or other -isms)*, 1991 DUKE L.J. 397 (1991); Laura M. Padilla, *Intersectionality and Positionality: Situating Women of Color in the Affirmative Action Dialogue*, 66 FORDHAM L. REV. 843 (1997); Judy Scales-Trent, *Equal Rights Advocates: Addressing the Legal Issues of Women of Color*, 13 BERKELEY WOMEN'S L.J. 34 (1998).

⁸ One day I had an interesting conversation with a friendly white female professor about several occurrences in a course that was composed primarily of white, male, conservative students. She said, "You know, I think the difficulties women face in the classroom at this school are about gender and not about race." She then explained that the few male professors of African descent who had taught at the school over the years had been very well received by the student body. But, as she explained, all of the white female professors had initially experienced many difficulties with the conservative student body. She then asked me whether I would agree that the things I had experienced were because I am a woman and not because I am black. My response was, "I don't know. There is no way for me to know. As a black woman, I cannot separate my race issues from my gender issues." Maybe my experiences were a result of students' reactions to my being black, maybe to my being a woman or, maybe, because they had even greater difficulty accepting a black female professor as an authority figure. Oh, yes, as B.B. King belts out, as he wonders how much worse can it get, "How blue can you get, baby?" See B.B. KING, *How Blue Can You Get?*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records 1998). See generally also Angela Mae Kupenda, *Making Traditional Courses More Inclusive: Confessions of an African American Female Professor who Attempted to Crash All the Barriers at Once*, 31 U.S.F. L. REV. 975 (1997); Jennifer M. Russell, *On Being a Gorilla in Your Midst, or, the Life of One Blackwoman in the Legal Academy*, 28 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 259 (1993).

⁹ See BELL HOOKS, *AIN'T I A WOMAN: BLACK WOMEN AND FEMINISM* 9 (1981); BERNICE RESNICK SANDLER ET AL., NAT'L ASSOC. FOR WOMEN IN EDUC., *THE CHILLY CLASSROOM CLIMATE: A GUIDE TO IMPROVE THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN* 30 (1996); Judy Scales-Trent, *Black Women and the Constitution: Finding our Place, Asserting our Rights*, 24 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 9 (1989).

Although women of color easily recognize our multiplicity, the rulings of our courts of law, unfortunately, evidence a belief that we should fit within one box or the other:

[W]hen I was working at an all-female law firm in Los Angeles, we tried in 1979 to certify a class of aerospace workers in a sex and race discrimination case. The judge told us the black women workers among our clients could be counted for purposes of the sub-class complaining about race discrimination or the sub-class complaining about sex discrimination, but not both. The judge's feeling, as I recall, was that to let them be counted for both purposes would be unfairly to give those class members what—for some unexplained reason—would be two bites of what—for some unexplained reason—could be only one apple.

ries help to explain the predicament that women of color face, intersectionality theories are rarely used to confront the blues sung by white women.¹⁰

White women too are at an intersection. They find themselves in the position of both the *oppressor and of the oppressed*.¹¹ At one juncture, they benefit by participating in the system manufactured by a racist society.¹² At the other, they suffer as a result of gender oppression

Ann Scales, *Disappearing Medusa: The Fate of Feminist Legal Theory*, 20 HARV. WOMEN'S L.J. 34, 39 (1997). Also, in considering affirmative action programs, affirmative action programs for white women receive a lower level of scrutiny than affirmative action plans for blacks. It is not clear how such programs for black women would be evaluated (are black women more like blacks or are they more like (white) women in the eyes of the law). See generally Angela Mae Kupenda, *Why Isn't What's Good for the Goose, Also Good for the Gander?: Confronting the Truth and Reframing the Affirmative Action Question*, 25 S.U. L. REV. 141, 147-48 (1997).

¹⁰ See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *From Practice to Theory, or What Is a White Woman Anyway?*, 4 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 13, 18 (1991). See generally Martha R. Mahoney, *Whiteness and Women in Practice and Theory*, 5 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 217 (1993).

¹¹ See Pamela J. Smith, *Part I—Romantic Paternalism—The Ties that Bind Also Free: Revealing the Contours of Judicial Affinity for White Women*, 3 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 107, 110 (1999) (discussing the ways the law both privileges and restricts white women).

¹² As examples, two cases that come to mind are *Bogan v. Scott-Harris*, 523 U. S. 44 (1998), *rev'd sub nom. Scott-Harris v. Fall River* 134 F.3d 427 (1st Cir. 1997), and *McCleskey v. Kemp*, 481 U.S. 279 (1987).

In *Scott-Harris v. Fall River*, two white women use their positions pursuant to white power and privilege to punish a black woman for confronting them about their own racism. See 134 F.3d at 431-32. The white women and white male mayor "win" legally, as the Court ultimately reverses a jury verdict in favor of the black woman and holds that her white female supervisor and the white male mayor, regardless of any wrongful intent or motivations, are entitled to absolute legislative immunity from suit. *Bogan*, 523 U.S. at 54-56. Additionally, although the other white woman, who was supervised by the black woman, is officially disciplined for racially abusive conduct directed toward other employees, the mayor lawfully and significantly reduces her punishment. *Id.* at 47.

On the surface, the legal system helps the white women and the mayor and saves the city from having to compensate the black woman for substantial constitutional, and likely financial and emotional, injury. Beneath the surface, however, everyone loses. Although it eliminates the black woman's position and saves the expenditure of her salary, the city loses money because it must now spend twice as much to replace the black woman with three new employees. See Brief for Respondent, 1997 WL 615776, *5, *Bogan*, (No. 96-1569). You see, the black woman had been doing her job and the jobs of three others. *Id.* Not only does the city lose economically, the white women also lose a potential sisterly connection and a potential ally against sexism.

Also consider *McCleskey v. Kemp*, 481 U.S. at 287, 319, in which the Court held that even though the race of the victim and that of the defendant is a major statistically important determining factor in issuing death sentences, the death penalty is constitutional. For more of a discussion of the racializing of rape and how black men are punished more for raping white women, while rapists of black women are punished less, see BARTLETT & HARRIS, *supra* note 1, at 839-40.

from a patriarchal and supremacist society.¹³ Parts III and IV continue the story in *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* with analysis and narrative interspersed, exploring the white, female main character's dilemma, particularly, and the white/black female conflict, more broadly.

This essay is especially for white women,¹⁴ who are at a definite intersection. As described above, although white women's "whiteness" may elevate them over non-whites in our societal or legal structure, white women's "femaleness" may keep them singing the blues, in a subordinated position.¹⁵ Once we—as women, white women, black women, and other women of color—make peace with our blues, we will be able to move and sing more in harmony with each other and may be able, for once, to eradicate prevailing themes of domination and oppression from our individual lives and from society.

I. VALIDLY USING THE LENS OF LITERATURE

Working with a law school administrator to select my courses for the following academic year, I described a new kind of seminar that I had envisioned. I wanted to teach a law and literature course that emphasizes literature written by or about black women and to use that literature to critique, or rather, illuminate, our social system and its laws.

By teaching such a course, I hoped to respond to several absences. One such absence is that of black women's voices from formal academic education. Rarely during my years of education and of teaching in separate and unequal schools (post *de jure*, but still, segre-

¹³ For a brief discussion of the conditions that white women, too, face, see generally *supra* note 1. Other ways in which white women suffer under our law and in our society can be added to that list, including the following: poverty following divorce, lack of sufficient protection from domestic violence, sexual harassment in the work place, demeaning effects of pornography, unequal allocation of household work especially where both husband and wife work outside the home. For an excellent casebook covering these and other topics, see generally BARTLETT & HARRIS, *supra* note 1.

¹⁴ In some ways I feel presumptuous in my, being a black woman, attempting to explain white women to themselves. But, I am more than validated. Whites frequently write about blacks, and white women frequently write about black women. Some do a wonderful job. See generally, e.g., BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA, *supra* note 1 (a wonderful collection compiled and edited by a white female scholar).

¹⁵ It seems that the system of white male privilege subordinates white women at the same time that it elevates them on a pedestal above nonwhite men and women. Another of B. B. King's songs comes to mind; perhaps the message given to white women by a patriarchal system is that white male privilege is "paying the cost to be the boss." B.B. KING, *Paying the Cost to Be the Boss*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records 1998) (describing where the man tells his woman that because he supports her, he is also entitled to control or limit her).

gated and integration-resistant schools) and in schools containing a majority of white students, including Ivy League schools, did I hear issues addressed in the form of black women's voices.¹⁶ I did enjoy some mention of the works of white women and occasionally those of black men.

I was also responding to the absence of an appropriate legal mechanism to address the multiplicity of the experiences of black women, as raised earlier. Primarily, however, I was responding to the absence of a mechanism with which to discuss race and gender in a creative, less confrontational, and more productive way. I thought the lens of literature could facilitate this process. By indirectly discussing literary characters, we could in fact discuss ourselves, understanding and owning our own racism and sexism, without being riddled with silencing guilt or responding with unproductive defensiveness.

My proposed law and literature class could, therefore, respond to all of these goals and create a more racially and gender-aware, understanding and enlightened class of lawyers of all races and genders. Thus, I was excited as I approached the class scheduling and administrative approval process for my proposition. However, the administrator I approached abruptly stated that he could not approve of such a course. He viewed law and literature courses as invalid unless they focus on the classics. He did not think that the works I described, even well-respected works by highly esteemed black female writers, fit within the majority's conception of "classics." He added that unless my course was refocused on the majority's "classics," teaching it would be a waste of limited academic resources.¹⁷ Fortunately, the law and literature movement is increasingly being viewed more expansively than the limited notion held by this administrator.¹⁸ Many scholars have come to recognize that literature can be used to supply the

¹⁶ As B.B. King sings, "to know you is to love you," and how could anyone love black women, if they didn't even know them. B.B. KING, *To Know You is to Love You*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records 1998).

¹⁷ To his credit, he added that if I wanted to teach a direct, traditional, case-based, race and the law class, maybe such a class could be added to the curriculum. Well, I taught race and the law, and in the direct, case-based way he required.

¹⁸ For an excellent discussion of the major scholars in the area of law and literature and their works, see Cynthia G. Hawkins-Leon, "Literature as Law": *The History of the Insanity Plea and a Fictional Application Within the Law and Literature Canon*, 72 TEMP. L. REV. 381, 383-89 (1999) (applying law to literature and discussing the various applications of literature to law).

voices that are missing in normative legal rules.¹⁹ Of law, life, and literature, literature is the most real, honest, and inclusive:

It is real because, with brutal honesty, it deals with all of our realities. It is more honest than life, for often in our outer (and even inner) lives we are afraid to tell the plain truth. Literature is more real than the law, for often our laws ignore the realities and truths for many of us.²⁰

"The law tells a story and fits a reality. But it tells a story only from one point of view and with inherent biases and prejudices, the inherent biases and prejudices of the law's storytellers."²¹ Works of literature focusing on voices that are overwhelmingly ignored in the law can be used both to examine the law's ineffective biases and to help in the discussion of delicate, sensitive, anger-generating topics where defensiveness prevents an honest, fact-based discussion.²²

In the next section of this essay, I will tell part of the story of two literary characters. Again, I will use pure narrative to help immerse the reader in their stories and lives. As we confront the characters' lives directly, perhaps we can indirectly confront our own.

II. TELLING THEIR (OUR) STORY, A FICTIONAL (HONEST) ACCOUNT

Before I tell the characters' core story, I will provide the background and setting. *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* is a story of the lives of several people, as a rural Mississippi community reacts to impending

¹⁹ See *id.* at 385; see also Anita L. Allen, *The Jurisprudence of Jane Eyre*, 15 HARV. WOMEN'S L.J. 173, 178 (1992).

²⁰ Kupenda, *Law, Life and Literature: Domestic Violence*, *supra* note 4, at 2.

²¹ Kupenda, *Law, Life and Literature: Transracial Adoption*, *supra* note 4, at 43–44.

²² There is rich law and literature scholarship addressing race and gender influences in many legal subjects. See Hawkins-Leon, *supra* note 18, at 383–89 (citing to a wonderful collection of articles); see also Sheila Foster, Foreword, Symposium: *Law and Literature: Examining the Limited Legal Imagination in the Traditional Legal Canon*, 30 RUTGERS L.J. 569 (1999); Michele Cammers Goodwin, *The Black Woman in the Attic*, 30 RUTGERS L.J. 597 (1999); Lenora Ledwon, *Storytelling and Contracts*, 13 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 117 (2001) (reviewing AMY HILSMAN KATELY ET AL., *CONTRACTING LAW* (2d ed. 2000)).

school integration and to the killing of a fifteen-year-old colored²³ male child.²⁴

Two characters present important symbolism for the purposes of this essay: Lily, a young white woman, and Ida, her clandestine colored friend. The story begins in the early 1950s soon after the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*.²⁵ Following is the core story:

Lily has dropped out of high school to marry Floyd.²⁶ Floyd owns a pool hall that the colored people in the community regularly frequent.²⁷ Lily is a young mother and a dreamer.²⁸ Often she takes her baby to the train station to sit and dream of leaving Mississippi and going to some far away place like Memphis, Tennessee.²⁹ It is at the often deserted train station that Lily meets and shares dreams with Ida.³⁰

Ida is a struggling young colored woman who also has a child.³¹ Ida dreams of going north and of making a better, and an educated, life for herself and for her child.³² By exchanging their stories and dreams, Lily and Ida realize their similarities and spiritual kinship, although they are as different as black and white.

The singing of the colored people, as they work in the fields, provides a comforting backdrop for Lily while she keeps house.³³ Lily has a fascination with colored people and the music of their lives.³⁴ One morning Lily awakens feeling aroused and manages to awaken Floyd and persuade him to take her to

²³ The racial designation "colored" will be used frequently in this essay. During the 1950s, blacks, Blacks, or African Americans were regularly referred to as "colored." It was not until later that "colored" was considered to be a derogatory term. Other derogatory names, however, were also used for blacks during the 1950s. I will designate one of these, in particular, in this paper as n _____. And I will designate cra _____ as a derogatory term for whites.

²⁴ *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* is a fictionalized account inspired by the story of a young black boy, Emmitt Till, who was killed by whites in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. See Alfreda A. Sellers Diamond, *Becoming Black in America: A Book Review Essay on Life on the Color Line* by Gregory Howard Williams, 67 Miss. L.J. 427, 432 n.23 (1997).

²⁵ 347 U.S. 483 (1954). In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U. S. Supreme Court, in the context of public school education, held that race-based segregation was unconstitutional. *Id.* at 493. The Court held that government sanctioned separate educational facilities based on race were inherently unequal. *Id.* at 492.

²⁶ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 7.

²⁷ *Id.* at 10.

²⁸ *Id.* at 6, 7.

²⁹ See *id.* at 33.

³⁰ *Id.* at 34.

³¹ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 34.

³² See *id.* at 33.

³³ See *id.* at 1.

³⁴ *Id.*

town with him.³⁵ When they get to town, Floyd buys Lily the toilet water and lipstick she wants.³⁶ Then he instructs her to stay in the truck while he takes care of some business.³⁷

Lily disobeys Floyd and walks curiously toward the pool hall that Floyd owns; it is full of colored men.³⁸ She happens to peek into the pool hall where a fifteen-year-old black child from the north, Armstrong, is showing off by speaking French.³⁹ Lily and Armstrong make eye contact.⁴⁰ They are both amused; then she hurries out the pool hall.⁴¹ Later, a colored man who works for Floyd in the pool hall tells Floyd that Armstrong was talking French to his wife Lily.⁴² Floyd doesn't quite know how to handle the situation.⁴³ So he curses and threatens Armstrong and tells him to get out of his pool hall.⁴⁴ When Floyd returns to his truck, he slaps Lily for getting out of the truck.⁴⁵

When Lily sees Ida at the train station that night, Lily is still quite upset about everything.⁴⁶ Lily confides in Ida.⁴⁷ When Ida learns who the colored boy is, she is especially distraught.⁴⁸ The boy is a close family friend.⁴⁹ Lily tells Ida not to worry, that the skirmish is over and that the boy is not in danger.⁵⁰

Still, Ida runs directly to the boy's grandmother's house.⁵¹ She is comforted when she learns that the boy is leaving on a bus to go away to school the next morning,⁵² and Ida persuades herself to believe her friend Lily that Armstrong is not in danger.⁵³

Earlier that same night, Floyd's father and brother learn about what happened at the pool hall.⁵⁴ They persuade Floyd that they must make an example of the boy, and they go with him to "handle" the situation.⁵⁵ Although Floyd

³⁵ *Id.* at 2, 5–7.

³⁶ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 9.

³⁷ *Id.* at 13.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 13, 72.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 13.

⁴¹ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 13.

⁴² *Id.* at 14–15.

⁴³ *Id.* at 14.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 15.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 19.

⁴⁶ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 35–36.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 36.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 35–36.

⁵¹ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 36–37.

⁵² *Id.* at 37–38.

⁵³ *Id.* at 38.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 28–30.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 29–31.

*pulls the trigger, they all participate in the brutalization and the fatal shooting of the boy.*⁵⁶ *Floyd later tells Lily that he killed the boy for her.*⁵⁷

The opening details of the novel are critical to set the stage for an examination of how the killing impacts a number of people's lives, black and white, and how eventually some of them begin to make peace with their blues. Read on for more about Lily and Ida and how they can help us with our own nonfictional racial conflicts.

III. LOVING LILY?

A group of white female law professors and spouses of faculty graciously offered to read this novel with me.⁵⁸ I am forever appreciative of their honest insights into the story. I'll never forget the reactions of these intelligent and caring white women: None of them loved, or even liked, Lily. It is not an exaggeration to say that they had disdain for her. They vehemently criticized Lily for being paralyzed, weak, waiting to be rescued, and dominated by Floyd.

I asked them why they were so lacking in compassion for Lily. They responded that she should learn something from Ida and Willow, the Native American female character in the book, about personal strength. I implored them that possibly Lily was trying to do the best she could with her life circumstances. Their intense dislike for Lily was telling. I silently pondered whether their criticism had anything to do with their disdain for their own predicaments, of being caught up in a racist/sexist system but being afraid to challenge it given that they also benefit and are protected by this system. While I was trying to figure out how to express this thought in a way that would not lead to defensive silence or an unproductive counter attack, one of the senior faculty members did it for me.

She said, "It's interesting that Angela, a black woman, has compassion for Lily, but we white women do not. We hate Lily because she reminds us of ourselves. It seems to me that we white women are really Lily herself." She paused, took a deep breath and continued with even more conviction, "Listen to the adjectives we are using to

⁵⁶ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 38–43.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 52, 64.

⁵⁸ I appreciate the frank and honest reflections of the many white females who read this book with me. Out of respect for their privacy and appreciation for their candid and honest reflections, their remarks will be presented in this essay anonymously. Additionally, all other references to conversations with others will be presented to preserve their anonymity. This is especially courteous and appropriate where honest, sensitive discussions of race and gender are concerned.

describe Lily: weak, afraid of challenging the status quo, dominated, admiring but suspicious of black female strength. Those adjectives describe us." Her comments were received with much initial disagreement and defensiveness from the others. You can reserve your personal conclusion as to Lily's true identity for later.

Just for now, for argument's sake, assume that Lily is symbolic of white women and Ida is symbolic of black women. The racially motivated killing of Armstrong symbolizes the race issue and the racial divide that separates black and white women.⁵⁹ Lily's and Ida's continued story illustrates the disharmony of their lives, and even of their blues. Like the characters in this book,⁶⁰ if black and white women today can make peace with their blues, then the likelihood of continued gender and racial discrimination will decline.

As you read the more analytical and detailed examination of their continuing stories and of their broken sister/friendship, at times you may find yourself confused as to whether I'm discussing Lily and Ida or discussing white and black women of today generally. This blurring, of their fictional and of our nonfictional stories, is both unavoidable and intentional. Lily's and Ida's fictional lives are so interwoven with the nonfictional lives of white and black women that the blurring is inevitable. Yet, blurring is also intentional, as my continuing theory is that these two literary characters provide great insight into our collective and individual lives and can provide a critical lens for honest nonfictional examination.

I will approach the fictional and nonfictional story by returning to the question raised in the discussion with the white females who read the book with me. I asked them whether they could embrace and

⁵⁹ Throughout history, some white women, even abolitionists, have had difficulty addressing their own internalized racism even while encouraging black men to join the struggle against sexism. For example, Frederick Douglass worked long and hard for both the rights of blacks and women. See, e.g., ANGELA Y. DAVIS, *WOMEN, RACE & CLASS* 59–60 (1983). Yet, his own daughter's race prevented her from gaining admission to all girls' school due to the fact that a white female abolitionist rendered the decision against her:

That a white woman associated with the anti-slavery movement could assume a racist posture toward a Black girl in the North reflected a major weakness in the abolitionist campaign—its failure to promote a broad anti-racist consciousness. This serious shortcoming, abundantly criticized by the Grimke sisters and others, was unfortunately carried over into the organized movement for women's rights.

Id. at 59.

⁶⁰ For a novel in a more recent setting and also addressing through literature the severed sisterhood of black and white women, see BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL, *BROTHERS AND SISTERS* (2000).

love Lily; the question of whether Lily is lovable to herself and to Ida remains open. Here I will explore that question in more detail by considering the barriers to loving Lily, which are also barriers to Lily's and Ida's white/black woman sister/friendship.

A. *Can We Love Lily if She Deafens Herself to Hearing the Pain of Her Sister and Prefers Enduring Ignorance over Enjoying Knowledge?*

After Armstrong's murder, Lily and Ida both still craved one another's friendship, but a wall was between them. As each would try to rest, she would be haunted by thoughts of the other. As Ida slept, "Images she couldn't chase away swam into her mind Then she was standing in a grand train station, and Lily was way at one end and Ida was at the other. They were shouting at each other, but both of them had their hands over their ears."⁶¹

Perhaps, it is too painful to hear. For Lily to hear Ida is for Lily to hear the cries of black female slaves raped by Lily's loving ancestors, to hear that the racist/sexist stereotypes perpetuated by Lily's ancestors were carefully crafted to condone the calculated violent attacks launched against Ida's ancestors.⁶²

To hear Ida, perhaps, means that Lily will no longer hear, as clearly, the voices of her husband and the white supremacist system. Then she will have to listen to the voice within herself and that requires strength. Female strength both repels and fascinates Lily. In the early days of their friendship, Lily envied Ida's strength, but Lily would halt such thoughts when it occurred to her that she was actually envying a colored woman.⁶³ Lily's inability to transcend her own racist tendencies keeps her from knowing Ida's pain and story, for the two are connected. Knowing these could help Lily to claim her own pain and story and to confront the energy-draining sexism that she faces both inside and outside of her home.

B. *Can We Love Lily if She Cannot Accept Ida's Black Female Experience?*

Lily and Ida cannot be in complete harmony or alleviate their friendship blues until Lily is able to confront Ida both as a woman, like herself, and as a black woman oppressed by a sexist and racist system. When confronted by a fuller knowledge of Ida, Lily extinguishes

⁶¹ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 56.

⁶² Cf. BELL HOOKS, *SALVATION: BLACK PEOPLE AND LOVE* 98 (2001).

⁶³ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 33.

her desire to know Ida with her cold and defensive refusal to acknowledge Ida's unique female experience.

Although Lily at times admires Ida as a person, she is angered when Ida demonstrates to her that, just like white people, colored people have dreams.⁶⁴ Even prior to the major rift in their friendship, the friendship had always been strained. Lily always felt like she needed "to shout to [Ida], 'I ain't done nothing to you.'"⁶⁵ And individually, arguably, Lily had not. Collectively, though, she had. Lily's history and privileges⁶⁶ are part of the history of a privilege-based society that ignores Ida's story, both individually and collectively. And, ignoring Ida's story is tantamount to ignoring, and refusing to accept, her reality and humanity.⁶⁷

Like Lily, white women's defensive posture over the conditions of blacks can become a barrier to maintaining friendships with black women. Of course, friendships or sisterhoods between black and white women will necessarily experience conflict on the path to understanding. Consider this personal confession from a black female psychologist:

[T]welve years ago, when I first met one of my now-close Jewish girlfriends . . . one of the first things she said was, "To me you're not black, you are brilliant."

This did not sit well with me at all. Sis, I admit I snapped at her. "Oh, no you don't! Don't you dare try this divide-and-conquer psychology with me! I love my race, and I'm very proud to be a black woman." She sincerely apologized, and I told her I accepted her apology, but "if we're going to be true friends, don't ever make a statement like that to me again."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ See Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, in CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR 291, 293–94 (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefanic eds., 1997) (listing some white privileges).

⁶⁷ For example, although slave narratives address the victimization of black women by white women, mainstream narratives about this period ignore these incidents and, just like the masters and mistresses of the pre-Civil War era, tend to place the blame on black women for their own victimization. See DAVIS, *supra* note 59, at 24–25.

⁶⁸ DR. GRACE CORNISH, 10 GOOD CHOICES THAT EMPOWER BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES 115 (2000).

Sometimes, white women don't quite understand the import of some comments. Unacknowledged race-based attitudes keep us from developing true closeness and trust with others. To help eliminate the attitude, white sisters must remove the blinders from their eyes⁶⁹ and be open to seeing not only sexism but also racism and the other "ism's" that women of color confront.⁷⁰

Lily must face and accept that even the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld different treatment of white and black womanhood. The Court has had different motivations, apparently, for our varying oppressions. In the 1872 Supreme Court opinion *Bradwell v. Illinois*, the Court held that a state could constitutionally deny a white woman the right to practice law.⁷¹ In his concurring opinion, Justice Bradley justified this result based on the natural character of (white) women:

On the contrary, the civil law, as well as nature herself, has always recognized a wide difference in the respective spheres and destinies of man and woman. Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfil the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator.⁷²

⁶⁹ Is it possible that many white women cannot see black women as fully dimensional? Will that envisioning yield too great an inspection of their own intersectionality?

I teach Gender and the Law. One semester I taught a wonderful and diverse group of intellectual young women. One incident from that class left a lasting mark on me. For part of their letter grade, students were to research and write a paper on an approved and related topic. Although the paper did not have to focus exclusively on women of color, students were to examine the peculiar and different concerns of women of color juxtaposed against those of white women. We met in small groups to review paper outlines and first drafts, with students critiquing their peers' work. When we reviewed the outline of one very intelligent and articulate white woman, we saw she had limited her work exclusively to white women. Her classmates reminded her that her paper left out the very important component related to women of color. She apologized and wrote herself a reminder, but when she brought in her first draft, again she limited her paper only to white women. She seemed not to understand what we meant and didn't quite understand how identifying female problems only from the perspective of white women was not inclusive. She was not rude or defensive but simply not engaged with the class that included a significant number of women of color.

⁷⁰ See generally, e.g., Grillo & Wildman, *supra* note 7.

⁷¹ *Bradwell v. Illinois*, 83 U.S. 130, 139 (1872).

⁷² *Id.* at 141 (Bradley, J., concurring).

A careful reading of the above excerpt identifies that the Justice could only have been referring to white women, not black women. Black women were already working outside their homes. Just a few years before this opinion, black women were definitely not treated with delicacy. Just like black men, black women worked on the slave plantations in the fields and bore the lash of the master's whip. Moreover, they were not protected but were treated as unpaid prostitutes by white men and as breeders, for the master's unacknowledged children were sold as animals. Even after slavery, there is evidence of a systematic supremacist plan to "'raise' White women while denigrating Black women."⁷³

While white women were encouraged to stay home as part of the Creator's plan, black women were denied the right to stay home if they chose to. Consider the following historical account:

In Jackson, Mississippi, a Black woman, one Mrs. Green, quit her position as cook for a White family when her husband, a carpenter, began making enough money to support them both. The day she quit her job, she stepped out on her porch to see a patrol wagon pull up to the front of her house. Two policemen got out and informed her that if she did not return to work, she would be arrested for vagrancy Sometimes the actions were more severe In Vicksburg, Mississippi, Ella Brooks and Ethel Barrett were *tarred and feathered* when they quit their jobs.⁷⁴

⁷³ GIDDINGS, *supra* note 2, at 38.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 141. Also consider the words of a black female poet implicitly comparing the historical predicaments of black women to the pedestaled cages of white sisters:

No angel stretched protecting wings
above the heads of her children,
fluttering and urging the winds of reason
into the confusion of their lives.
They sprouted like young weeds,
but she could not shield their growth
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor
shape them into symbolic topiaries.
She sent them away,
underground, overland, in coaches and
shoeless.
When you learn, teach.
When you get, give.
As for me,
I shall not be moved.

Lily's failure to confront the uniqueness of Ida's female experience, as compared to her own white female experience, imposes, therefore, a barrier to their friendship and possibly an insurmountable barrier to Lily's own ability to confront and love herself. Like Lily, women will forever sing the blues as long as women cannot accept the fact that the law and its social order oppress groups of women differently and do not work collectively to eliminate not only the oppression of the "average" woman but also the oppressions of all.

C. *Can We Love Lily if She Wants to Benefit, and Thinks She Benefits, from Her Husband's Racial Hatred?*

A major source of Lily's and Ida's blues stems from Lily's mixed love/hate relationship with her man, or in other words with a white male privileged system, and from her unwillingness to challenge that system, even when it does not inure to her benefit. Although Lily is upset that she unintentionally misled Ida,⁷⁵ she refocuses her emotional energy on enjoying the pride her husband projects after the killing and the pride that she feels because she thinks she has a white man who will protect her at all cost. "*I got a man who'll kill for me,*" she says.⁷⁶

Just as for Lily, the white patriarchal system *kills* for white women but also inflicts injury upon them.⁷⁷ While white women may be persuaded that the white male system is protecting them, black women know that their interests might be sacrificed for the good of white women in common with white men. Black women may be as afraid of white women as white women are of their own power. Clearly, Lily is frightened of her own power. Even just thinking about how she could manage her household better than her husband has, whose rash actions leave them penniless,⁷⁸ is too frightening for her.⁷⁹ She is also frightened of Ida's power and persuades herself that Ida is powerful because black women are not really women.⁸⁰

MAYA ANGELOU, *Our Grandmothers*, in PHENOMENAL WOMAN 15, 18-19 (1994).

⁷⁵ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 63.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 64.

⁷⁷ See Smith, *supra* note 11, at 110 (discussing the ways the law both privileges and restricts white women).

⁷⁸ After the killing, the colored men stop patronizing Floyd's pool hall. CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 79. Floyd and Lily end up penniless, with Lily having to beg colored women for food. See *id.* at 239.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 83-84.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 34. For illumination of Lily's lack of understanding of, and maybe even lack of feeling for, Ida consider the following words in an essay by Maya Angelou: "Lives lived in

There is no wonder that there is conflict between some white women and some black women.⁸¹ Black and white women have many unresolved issues surrounding the issue of race, generally, and race and sexuality, specifically. Buried inside of some white women may be hatred toward black women because of their white men. During slavery while some white men regarded blacks as animals, they forced black women to have sexual relations with them.⁸² So white women were probably puzzled then, and still now, about this dual relationship white men had with black women. Generally, black women and white women appear to be unable to discuss this openly—how white women must have felt knowing their white men were desiring black women on the one hand and calling them animals and n__s on the other. Instead of resenting their white male mates, white women took their anger out on their black female slaves.⁸³ They were unable, it seems, to face that their holy mates for life were willing to sell their own flesh and blood as if their offspring were livestock. So instead of facing this cruelty and naming it for what it was, many white women silently participated in the rape and attacks on black womanhood and actively joined in the systematic destruction of black womanhood and the sell-

such cauldrons are either obliterated or forged into impenetrable alloys. Thus, early on and consciously, black women became realities only to themselves. To others they were mostly seen and described in the abstract, concrete in their labor but surreal in their humanness." MAYA ANGELOU, *They came to stay*, in *EVEN THE STARS LOOK LONESOME* 39, 42 (1997).

⁸¹ One of the white women who read the book, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, with me said that she never understood what I meant about the conflict between black and white women until she read the book. She had assumed that black and white women have no conflicts, as we are all really women. Rest assured that many black women think differently. Consider this passage from another truthful work of fiction sharing the thoughts of Esther, a black woman: "Esther nodded as Mallory's flimsy operatic anger puffed out her [pink] cheeks and hardened her eyes. Yes, the old boys are sexist pigs, [Esther silently] agreed. But did this little Valley Girl really think that sexism was [Esther's] only problem?" CAMPBELL, *supra* note 60, at 21.

⁸² HARRIET JACOBS, *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* 33, 54 (Penguin Books ed. 2000) (1861).

⁸³ Consider this passage from a nonfictional story of a slave girl:

"You have taken God's holy word to testify your innocence," said [my master's wife]. "If you have deceived me, beware! . . .

I did as she ordered. As I went on with my account her color changed frequently, she wept, and sometimes groaned. She spoke in tones so sad, that I was touched by her grief. The tears came to my eyes; but I was soon convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she has no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy.

Id. at 33.

ing of children with the faces and blood of their husbands and sons, and consequently their own blood.⁸⁴ White women, whose slaveholding sons had children with black slaves, then stood by while their granddaughters were treated as animals, abused, and sold as slaves. Even if they did not consciously make the connection, perhaps it was at least subconsciously made.

When I shared some of these thoughts with several young white women, they could not understand how white women hurt or still could be hurting from these slavery-time events. They could understand a white woman experiencing guilt and conflict over the demoralization and sexual exploitation of black women and men, but they could not see any hurt that white women themselves incurred. I explained to them that just like Lily, white women blind themselves to their *own* pain to continue to enjoy a racially privileged society. "Surely," I asked them, "didn't the adulterous disrespect heaped upon white women during slavery pain them, embarrass them, or dehumanize them?" Cruelty was heaped upon the heads and hearts of white women then and now, through the legal and societal systems' continued devaluation of white womanhood. Admitting to the tragic historical and continuing pain, however, means that, like Lily, white women would have to admit that racist and sexist norms are inherently injurious to white women. Like the historical and perhaps continuing anger of some white women, some black women are likely angry at white women for being unable to, or for not trying to, control their white men.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 54; cf. Letter from Elayna A. Monts, to White Woman, at <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/05intersection/sister.htm> (last visited Jan. 10, 2002) (describing how one white woman, Elayna Monts, answers the complaint of another white woman that black women are "too fat, too loud, too mean, too argumentative" and reminds her that any daughters the complainer has, with her mate who is a black man, will be racially labeled as black women—the same black women that the complainer condemns).

⁸⁵ The inability of white women to control their white men's aggressive appetites continues, now evident in the proliferation of pornography. Even with the sexual exploitation of women through pornography, the blues is different for black and white women. Alice Walker points to these concerns with a short story in which a black woman confronts her husband for viewing pornographic depictions of white women and later of black women. The woman chastises her husband for assisting in women's and in his own exploitation and dehumanization. For the first time he understands fully a line his wife read the day before: "The pornography industry's exploitation of the black woman's body is *qualitatively* different from that of the white women," because she is holding the cover of *Fivers* out to him and asking:

"What does this woman look like?" What he has refused to see—because to see it would reveal yet another area in which he is unable to protect or defend black women—is that where white women are depicted in pornography as

D. *Can We Love Lily if She Cannot Fully Be Trusted and Will Not Express Remorse, Inwardly or Outwardly, for This Failure?*

Knowing that white women cannot fully protect themselves from their white men, black women may be unable to fully trust their white sisters. Trust is an essential foundation for friendship. Moreover, black women may be angry that they are unable to trust white women as sisters. Many of these sisters were so untrustworthy during slavery and after.⁸⁶

Ida wants to be able to trust Lily. She wants to be able to regard Lily as her friend, but "she wasn't sure she could call a white woman that."⁸⁷ And, her "'Mama [had] told [her] never to trust cra____.'"⁸⁸ Ida once mistakenly trusted Lily, and did not tell Armstrong's grandmother about the pool-hall incident.⁸⁹ This misplaced trust seemingly results in Armstrong's death. More accurately, Armstrong's death was hastened because Lily miscalculated the fear some white men have of losing control and the hate-filled actions that may be taken in response to that fear.⁹⁰ Ida trusted Lily's biased perceptions rather than her own. As a result, Ida fails to warn Armstrong's grandmother and lives to regret it when the boy is killed.⁹¹

The fact that Lily did not purposefully lie to Ida is significant. Lily, too, was shocked that her husband would actually murder the

"objects," black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted at least as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit.

ALICE WALKER, *Coming Apart*, in *YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD WOMAN DOWN* 41, 52 (1981). In the picture, a glistening brown woman is contorted around the man's feet, "in such a way that her head is not even visible. Only her glistening body—her back and derriere—so that she looks like a human turd at the man's feet." *Id.* at 43.

⁸⁶ BELL HOOKS, *TALKING BACK* 179 (1989). "At times, the insistence [by black females] that feminism is really 'a white female thing that has nothing to do with black women' masks black female rage towards white women, a rage rooted in the historical servant-served relationship where white women have used power to dominate, exploit, and oppress." *Id.*

⁸⁷ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 36. Black women have been unable historically to trust white feminism to transcend racism and, especially, to help protect their voting rights. See GIDDINGS, *supra* note 2, at 68, 89, 124, 160, 166, 170.

⁸⁸ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 36.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 38–39.

⁹⁰ Floyd kills the boy out of a desire to please his father. *Id.* at 179–80. His father urged him to kill Armstrong as a way to continue to exert power and control over colored people for societal and economic reasons. *Id.* at 29–30. Thus, Armstrong's killing is an act of fear-based terror committed to exercise social control.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 38–39.

child.⁹² If Lily could only apologize to Ida, perhaps some semblance of the friendship could be recovered. Interestingly, when Lily began to feel remorse, she displaced that emotion with anger at Ida for personalizing the child.⁹³ Lily compensates by persuading herself to believe the lie that the boy was a danger to her.⁹⁴ This is instructive of the intersectionality of white female experience as oppressed and as oppressor. If a black female complains to a white female regarding white male racist behavior, especially when the white male and white female have a friendship or relationship, it may be difficult for the white female to sympathize with the black female at all. Rather, the white female, like Lily, may feel anger at the black female for even raising the race question.

Indeed, Lily did not intentionally lie to Ida. But Ida's trust was misplaced, given that Lily had no real understanding, and was afraid to have such an understanding, of the depth of white male power and of what some would do to further the perception of that power. In reality, Lily knew that the killing was not for her protection. She knew, rather, that it involved issues of white male power and possession, as illustrated by this passage:

Floyd took several deep drags off the cigarette, then flicked the ashes into a glass ashtray that said "Mississippi State Fair" on the bottom. When he spoke [to the sheriff], his voice was quiet and subdued, as if his last outburst had tranquilized him. "My wife is carrying my name. What kind of man would I be if I just let any ignorant n_____ that wants to talk to her just any ole kind of way? A man's got a right to protect his property, his children, and his wife. Ain't that right? Ain't that what America is all about?"

....

Sometimes [Lily] didn't understand men, not even her own husband. She thought about what Floyd had said—that a man had a right to protect his property, his kids, and his wife—and the order of the words struck her. She thought that the way he said it made it seem that she and Floydjunior belonged to him same as if he'd bought and paid for them. I won't think about that, she told herself.⁹⁵

⁹² *Id.* at 51–52.

⁹³ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 53–54.

⁹⁴ *Id.* at 54.

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 88–89 (emphasis added).

Lily cannot be fully trusted, given that she won't even allow herself to fully understand her own predicament. She refuses to think on a deeper level, even when prompted. "*I won't think about that, [Lily] told herself.*"⁹⁶

To *think about that* means acknowledging that perhaps her predicament is little better than that faced by Ida, as a descendant of former white male property holdings. Similarly, white females must accept that any racist notions of ownership of people and white male interests of ownership and domination will not always inure to their benefit. Unlike Lily's resolution to the problem, white women *must think about that*, for along with racism comes sexism that keeps white females subordinate.⁹⁷

Lily thinks that she can consciously separate herself from the killing. "Sitting on the porch, Lily could no longer recall the sound of the boy's voice as he spoke the foreign words. When she closed her eyes, she couldn't see his face. It wouldn't be so difficult not ever thinking about that boy again [she thought]."⁹⁸ Even if Lily is successful in not thinking about the boy or his race of people, she still loses her sister/friendship with Ida and, consequently loses a part of herself.

Ida, on the other hand, must think about it, for her fate is interwoven with the fate of the young colored boy. Armstrong's killing causes Ida great sorrow, and she suffers from intense nightmares that

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 89 (emphasis added).

⁹⁷ See Fannie Lou Hamer, *It's in Your Hands*, in *BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA*, *supra* note 1, at 609, 611.

⁹⁸ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 63–64. Once as a new employee, I felt oppressed by several incidents. I believed I was being unfairly treated because I was black, a woman, or a black woman. (I wasn't sure whether one or all of those were implicated.) I went to a senior white female, "Lindy," and asked for her ear and support. She became angry at me for what I told her was happening. Lindy said that since a significant number of women worked on our job, there could be no sexism there. And, she was enraged that I would even suggest that racism could be at the root of the problem. I then went to another senior white female, who had appeared to be a feminist and at least racially aware. She told me that my insights into the situation were probably accurate, but that she could not help me. She said, "I'm sorry, Angela, but we (white) women can't help you. You are on your own." Well, I struggled on my own, with some help from other communities. A few years later, virtually all of the women found themselves confronting incidents that they now called sexist. Lindy and the others wanted, and tried without my consent, to place me at the forefront of their (our) battle as women. Yet, even when I asked, they still could not see the necessity of including my continuing injuries within their (our) collective issues.

A black woman can become very distrustful of some white women when black women are expected to fight their own, black and black woman, issues alone (without the support of white women), yet are expected to sacrificially lead the fight for the issues that white women identify as issues for all women.

her own son will be so brutalized.⁹⁹ While some white women may, like Lily, think they can forget the race issues or the horrors of slavery, black women, again, do not have that false luxury. Historical racial oppression has lingering effects on the psyches of black women, according to black psychologists; "The slave master's lash has left its mark By wrenching husbands from wives and severing the connection between parents and their children, slavery fostered the rootlessness that still plagues us."¹⁰⁰ While many white females seem to be able to separate themselves from race issues, black females always confront both the race and the gender question. At times they cannot figure out the issue over which they are being punished, as both are intertwined.

Ida has a difficult time forgiving herself for ever trusting a white woman; had she not trusted a white woman, she could have saved a child from a brutally racist death.¹⁰¹ She wants to feel great anger at Lily, but she can't. Perhaps she can't because although she can't trust Lily, she understands Lily and Lily's predicament, perhaps even better than Lily understands herself.

E. *Can We Love Lily Even if We Know She Will Cause Great Pain to Some Who Try to Touch Her Heart?*

Likely Ida wishes that she had never met Lily or let herself become close to her. She feels great sadness at losing her growing friendship, such as it was, with Lily.¹⁰² Black females who enter growing friendships with their white female counterparts take a risk—a risk that at times the white woman will not understand, or will not want to understand, the racial dynamics. Yet, alienation from one another re-

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 106–07; see GIDDINGS, *supra* note 2, at 26–27 (discussing lynching and the vulnerability of black men and women).

¹⁰⁰ DRs. DEREK S. HOPSON & DARLENE POWELL HOPSON, *FRIENDS, LOVERS & SOULMATES* 40 (1995). I'll never ever forget a dream I had over twenty years ago, for it seemed so real. During the time when I had the dream, I was working for a corporation as a management trainee. I was facing, what I considered to be, much race/gender mistreatment and misunderstanding on the job. Then, one night I had the dream. In the dream I was a slave on a plantation. It looked like a plantation, smelled like one, and felt like one. My bad situation as a slave had somehow worsened, so I tried to escape. Try as I could, I couldn't get away. As I was about to be recaptured, I awoke. My heart was racing. I was crying and screaming. I had felt terror like I never had before. My dream, unfortunately, was the ongoing reality of some of my ancestors. Symbolically, my dream was also my reality. "Oh, I just can't loose those chains!" B.B. KING, *Chains and Things*, on B.B. KING GREATEST HITS (MCA Records, 1998).

¹⁰¹ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 107.

¹⁰² *Id.*

sults in sadness, inefficiency, and a loss of self, to a degree. Our inability to engage in honest discussion of these issues only compounds the problems, as it did for Lily and Ida.

Lily actually has great unexpressed sympathy for Ida as a black woman. Before and immediately after her husband is acquitted by an all-male, all-white jury, Lily sees Ida in court. In the following passage, Lily resists calling out to Ida, because Lily wants to be fully accepted by and accepting of her husband:

The jury brought in a not-guilty verdict in less than thirty minutes.

Lily carried Floydjunior in her arms and tried to get to Floyd, who was surrounded by reporters and photographers Someone grabbed her arms, and she was pulled next to Floyd, who didn't look at her, until one of the photographers said, "How about a kiss?" . . . She could feel . . . the words pelting against her mind like bullets: I got a man who'll kill for me.

She opened her eyes and saw the back of a woman with skin the color of the inside of a peach, the two braids like heavy ropes hanging down her back *Lily wanted to call out to her, but she had to swallow Ida's name with Floyd's spit.*¹⁰³

Lily must swallow the pain of her lost connection with Ida if Lily is to swallow her connection with her man. Lily knows that she cannot fully cry out for a connection with Ida and at the same time swallow whole white male oppression.

Still, Lily is afforded several opportunities to grow, several opportunities to reach out to her "friend" Ida and reclaim their connection. But each time, Lily resists. As shown in the next passage, the now financially devastated Lily fails to confront Ida when she takes her child to receive free immunizations:

Lily froze, recognizing the voice and suddenly realizing that she was surrounded by silent colored people. If she turned around she'd be face to face with Ida. She didn't want to see the hatred in Ida's eyes. At the same time, she wanted to embrace her friend, to reclaim her.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 150–51 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 155.

Ida, too, missed the kinship with Lily. She wanted to hate Lily, but she could not bring herself to feel that for Lily. More than anything, she missed their friendship. Lily did not want to hurt Ida. And, Ida did not want to hurt. Yet, having any connection with Lily seems to give Ida unrelenting pain and preoccupation, as expressed in the next passage:

Though [Ida] admitted that she missed sitting on the bench and watching the trains—she hadn't done that in a year—she couldn't bring herself to confess that she missed Lily. Now, thinking of Lily, she started shaking with rage; the woman hadn't even looked her in the eyes at Dr. Mitchell's office. She'd heard talk in the Quarters that even the white people didn't want anything to do with Lily. Served the heifer right, Ida thought. She tried to push out of her mind the times they talked and dreamed together, the night the white girl cried out the story about her uncle['s sexual abuse]. Such memories only made her pity Lily, and she wanted to hate her.¹⁰⁵

F. *Can We Love Lily, and Those Like Her, if She Is Scared into Inaction, Even when Her Heart Sings a Different Song?*

Lily is afraid. She is afraid to fully claim her personal power, afraid to challenge her man, afraid to commit to a friendship with Ida. Trying to hold onto a little bit of everything, Lily loses both her husband and Ida.

As Lily and her husband suffer financially following his acquittal, she has good ideas on how to save them from starvation. Yet Floyd rejects her attempts at shared responsibility, and she backs away lest she bring him to anger.¹⁰⁶ When Lily finally accepts that Floyd did not kill for her sense of dignity, but instead to please his father and brother, she is hurt. She hides the hurt, though, lest she displease her husband, as illustrated in the next passage:

"You was supposed to be my brother. And you was supposed to be my father," Floyd said, staring at [his father]. He snatched his hand away from Lily, who was trying to grab it. He wanted to say that they were supposed to love him. He

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 163.

¹⁰⁶ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 158, 160–61.

could taste those words in his mouth. "All my life, nothing I've ever done has been good enough." He was almost whining now, his voice high and trembly, his eyes searching his father's expressionless face. "Now you're blaming me. I done what you wanted me to do."

Floyd glanced at his father's stern, silent face. He didn't look at his wife. He didn't see the shock, the pain, and the budding rage that were plainly visible as she heard the words "I done what you wanted me to do." And by the time he did look, her eyes and mouth were tranquil, her feelings hidden in a place that would take him years to find.¹⁰⁷

Lily tries to hide both her own competence and her own rage. Her fear of losing Floyd forces her into inaction. Overall, the killing has quite a different effect on black women than it does on white women. Black people began to speak out more, even if punishment follows. "The realization that people all over the country had witnessed [in the televised trial of Floyd's acquittal] their oppression encouraged new dreams."¹⁰⁸ Whites were shaken, too. Some became more sympathetic toward blacks, giving children shiny new dimes.¹⁰⁹

Yet, overall, white women in sympathy appeared too afraid to confront the racist system and demand shared justice. After the killing and the unlawful acquittal, some white women in the community were outraged, but they outwardly hid their outrage, lest they face the displeasure of their husbands. And, they inwardly hid their rage, lest they be called to disown their privileged oppressions:

Several of the well-to-do ladies from the Confederacy allowed themselves to consider that Armstrong Todd's death was awful and perhaps uncalled for, although they didn't utter these sentiments aloud, and certainly not to their husbands. They were both moved by the depth of their own sensitivity and frightened by its implications.¹¹⁰

Who is Lily? And, can we love her? These are the yet open questions after this literary illumination. All six of the questions I have posed lead us back to these two inquiries: Can we love Lily even if she does not fully love herself and fully value her sisters and her connec-

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 179–80.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.* at 154.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 154–55.

tions to them? Even if we are unsure if we can love Lily, we can at least learn from her and Ida, as explained in the following concluding part of this essay.

IV. USING LILY AND IDA'S BLUES TO LESSEN THE INTENSITY OF OUR OWN?

Women can learn much from Lily and Ida about admitting the difficulty of their situations and confronting oppressions. First we can learn that we must talk about these oppressions and accept misunderstanding. For example, when I presented a paper at a women's philosophy conference and urged unity and understanding across races among women, one white woman chastised me. She suggested that, if women unite and form alliances, hadn't I forgotten about black men and how this could leave them out. I responded that no one is left out. Working to eliminate oppression helps all of the oppressed, especially black men.¹¹¹

Secondly, we can learn to confront our fears. Several of the white women who read the novel with me said that Lily is definitely in fear. They know she is in fear of losing something, but they don't know what it is.

Perhaps she is afraid of her own power. Once when I discussed these ideas with a group of white women, they responded that, just like Lily, women today have no power. As a result, they argued, even in unity there would be no strength. They dared me to come up with just two ways in which women have power. My response was that we, as women, have economic power (we make and spend money) and that we have political voting power (we make up the majority of the population of the United States). Upon reflection, it is obvious that we also have another almost unlimited form of power. We have birthing and mothering power (we conceive, give birth to and/or adopt and raise the baby girls and boys who will one day grow up believing in equality and justice *or* will one day grow up and support racist and sexist, ill-conceived but rampantly multiplied notions).

Perhaps, Lily is also in fear of losing whiteness and the white brand of femaleness.¹¹² To align herself with Ida and other black

¹¹¹ Eliminating oppression also helps white men. Just think, the young black boy who was murdered might have grown up and discovered a cure to cancer, and white males suffer from cancer too.

¹¹² See Smith, *supra* note 11, at 110 (discussing the ways the law both privileges and restricts white women).

women makes her less white.¹¹³ Lily begins to struggle more rigorously with this fear when she finally leaves her abusive marriage for good,¹¹⁴ which could represent leaving her intimate connection with an abusive supremacist system. Yet she can't complete the turn at her intersection of the oppressed and the oppressor. The question is, must she? In my view, Lily has not consistently decided which path is more compelling, that of the oppressor or that of an oppressed seeking to eliminate oppression.

When I shared these insights with several young white women, one argued, "Surely, you can't mean that white women must decide whether to identify as white or as female? Why can't we acknowledge both aspects of identity simultaneously?"

Such an argument misses my point. Yes, a white woman can appropriately identify both as female and as white, but she cannot liberate herself and other white women, on the one hand, while oppressing black women on the other, without losing an important connection with womanhood and with a humanity-based justice system. Yes, she can be white and female. But, I don't think she can be whole and simultaneously be both a white *oppressor* and a white woman *oppressed* seeking to support only a "white woman" type of womanhood and a "white race" form of humanity. Perhaps, Lily could learn an important lesson from the way in which Ida reconciles her differing parts.

When Ida claims her mixed racial heritage (which is symbolic of her connection with white men, although it is historically rooted in shame) and sees that the shame is not *hers*, she is able to fully utilize her power and claim the future she has dreamed for herself and for her child.¹¹⁵ Ida finds her true strength only after she willingly accepts all of herself, including the whiteness in her.¹¹⁶

Ida's mixed racial heritage symbolically represents each of our connections with the "other" and with humanity, as neither the black nor the white race is purely black or white. We are all interconnected. Owning being connected, or part white, doesn't mean that Ida has to

¹¹³ Perhaps white women should actively work to first admit to and then address racism. See Noel Ignatiev, *How to Be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White*, in CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR, *supra* note 66, at 691; Martha R. Mahoney, *What Should White Women Do?* in CRITICAL WHITE STUDIES: LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR, *supra* note 66, at 641.

¹¹⁴ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 381–82.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 392, 396, 423.

¹¹⁶ A more detailed examination of Ida's soothing of her blues will be the subject of a subsequent essay. For now, consider reading the novel for yourself.

be oppressive. To the contrary, she can seek remedies for oppressions.¹¹⁷ Perhaps Ida's resolution and soothing of her blues is the answer for all the Lilys. Perhaps acknowledging and accepting interconnection is the only resolution possible. But, a complete resolution may be "a long time coming,"¹¹⁸ perhaps with future generations of Lilys.¹¹⁹ The eloquent summary from the beautiful Fannie Lou Hamer, a

¹¹⁷ CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 392.

¹¹⁸ Consider these moving words from the song, *A Change is Gonna Come*, by the late, great Sam Cooke:

I was born by the river
In a little tent
And just like the river
I've been running ever since

It's been a long, long time coming
But I know a change gonna come
Oh, yes it is

....

Then I go to my [sister]
I say [sister] help me please
But [s]he winds up knocking me
Back down on my knees

....

It's been a long, long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come
Oh, yes it will

THE SUPREMES, *A Change is Gonna Come*, on WE REMEMBER SAM COOKE (1965), at <http://home.iae.nl/users/psporrij/sc.htm> (last visited Jan. 11, 2002).

¹¹⁹ Even the next generation of Lily characters is still struggling with their own racism. In the novel, Lily has a daughter who respects Ida, works with Ida, and joins hands with Ida to improve conditions for blacks and whites. Yet, even within this somewhat racially and gender-liberated character, racism is still harbored in her soul as exhibited by her use of the word n____ in her conversation. Consider this passage as Lily argues with her daughter who is about to participate in a protest with the other workers, including the colored workers, at the catfish plant:

"You ought not to be going up there," Lily told Doreen If the police came and arrested them, would she go limp, the way the n____s used to do during the unrest? She shook her head. The whole idea was unbelievable.

"Mama, that's where I work." Doreen was smoothing Melanie's [her daughter's] bangs and didn't look at her mother.

"Yeah, but it's mostly them. Let them do it." The thought of her daughter carrying a sign and marching around the fish-processing plant with a bunch of n____s made her dizzy

Mississippi civil rights activist, is part of my concluding words here for white women, who one day, hopefully, will be my sister/friends:

In the past, I don't care how poor this white woman was, in the South she felt like she was more than us. In the north, I don't care how poor or how rich this white woman has been, she still felt like she was more than us. But coming to the realization of the thing, her freedom is shackled in chains to mine, and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free. The point about it, the male influence in this country—you know the white male, he didn't go and brainwash the black man and the black woman, he brainwashed his wife, too.¹²⁰

In conclusion, can you love Lily? Maybe the way to answer that question is by answering this one: Can you love yourself and can you love your sister/friends, who are in fact a part of yourself? Perhaps, the Idas of the world want to ask every Lily, as a version of the old blues song goes: "Are you are, or are you not, my friend?"¹²¹

"New Plantation is treating all of us like shit, Mama. I'm in the same boat as the n____s. I ain't scared of being raped by Willie Horton, Mama. I'm scared of not having medical benefits."

Doreen's words were true enough, but everything she said only intensified Lily's fears. "Well, why do you have to take Melanie with you? Ain't you afraid she might get hurt? . . .

"No, I don't know what's gonna happen, but I'll tell you what: No matter what happens, I want her to know that she has to stand up for herself. 'Cause if she don't, won't nobody do it for her. I want her to have courage."

Lily's eyes almost met her daughter's, but at the last moment she looked away. Courage was what men were supposed to have: that was what she wanted to say. But the words froze on her lips.

CAMPBELL, *supra* note 1, at 424–25. Maybe future generations, like Lily's daughter's daughters, might be able to confront their fears more fully and to deal with both the overt and covert racism that they internalized.

¹²⁰ Hamer, *supra* note 97, at 611.

¹²¹ "Is you is, or is you ain't [my friend]?" See B.B. KING, *Is You Is, Or Is You Ain't (My Baby)*, on LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL, THE MUSIC OF LOUIS JORDAN (MCA Records 1999).

